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# **Fathers' perceptions of the availability of flexible working arrangements: evidence from the UK**

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## **Abstract**

A conditional right to request flexible working arrangements (FWAs) has existed for most UK employee parents since 2003. However, there are growing concerns about access, particularly among fathers. Using nationally representative data from the 2015 UK Household Longitudinal Survey, this article examines fathers' perceptions of the availability of hours reduction, schedule flexibility, and working from home. Results show that almost one-third of fathers believe that FWAs that reduce working hours are unavailable to them, compared with one-tenth of mothers. There are no gender differences in perceptions of availability of schedule and location flexibility. Among fathers, those with lower education levels, in lower status occupations, working in the private sector and in workplaces that do not have trade union presence are more likely to believe that FWAs are unavailable. Therefore, even though most employees now have the right to request FWAs, a significant minority of fathers do not perceive FWAs to be available to them.

**Keywords:** Entitlement, fathers, flexible working, work-family policies, working time arrangements, work-life balance

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## Introduction

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, family-friendly employment provision, such as flexible working and parental leave, has expanded globally, particularly in Europe (ILO, 2014; Moss, Duvander and Koslowski, 2019). Even market-oriented countries, such as the UK, have adopted a partial social investment approach to work-family policy, albeit with weaker reconciliation measures than in Nordic European states. Since these developments were initially a response to rising female labour force participation and women's difficulties combining work and family, most research in this area focuses on mothers. However, there is increasing recognition that work-family articulation involves fathers, families, and households (Dermott and Gatrell, 2018; O'Brien et al., 2007; O'Brien et al., 2005). Across industrialised nations, fathers are spending more time on childcare (Altintas and Sullivan, 2017) and experiencing work-family conflict (Allard et al., 2007), while support for the traditional male breadwinner model is receding (Taylor and Scott, 2018). These trends signal a need for policies that enable fathers to combine work and care. Such policies are a crucial step towards achieving gender equality in the labour market (Rubery, 2015) and enabling children to benefit from the positive effects of paternal engagement on their cognitive, physical, and social development (Cano et al. 2019; Sarkadi et al., 2008).

Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) have potential to increase fathers' involvement in family life since they allow autonomy over schedule, location and hours (Bryan and Sevilla, 2017; Kelly et al., 2014; Wheatley, 2016). All UK employees who have worked for an employer for 26 weeks or more have a right to request FWAs (ACAS, 2016). However, there are growing concerns about access (e.g. Hegewisch, 2009; TUC, 2017). Accessing FWAs is a complex process involving many stages, including employers' knowledge of and commitment to FWA entitlements, employees' perceptions of availability, employees' need, employees' requests, and employers' eventual decisions on whether to grant the FWA (employers can deny FWA requests if there is a business case to do so). Perceptions of availability are an important, yet under-researched part of this process (Budd and Mumford, 2006; Chen and Fulmer, 2018; Gatrell et al., 2014). Even if they are formally available, FWAs will only be taken up if they are *perceived* as directly available to individuals who want and need them (Budd and Mumford, 2006; Eaton, 2003; Kossek et al., 2006). Perceptions of availability also indicate potential future use (Budd and Mumford, 2006; Chung and Van der Horst, 2018a; Kossek et al. 2006). This study focuses on the perceived availability of FWAs in order to shed light on one of the factors that might prevent fathers from accessing FWAs.

Some research on the perceived availability of FWAs exists, but it is mostly focused on women (Chung, 2018b, 2018c; Chung and Van der Horst, 2018a; Kossek and Lautsch, 2018) or on employees generally (Budd and Mumford, 2006; Chen and Fulmer, 2018; Wheatley, 2016). Fathers' perceptions

have predominantly been studied using qualitative methods (e.g. Gatrell et al. 2014; Gerstel and Clawson, 2014; Smithson et al., 2004). To contribute to the growing literature on perceptions of work-family support, with a novel focus on fathers, we examine systematic differences in perceptions of the availability of hours reduction, schedule flexibility, and working from home among a large representative sample of employee parents in the UK. The study uses data from Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (University of Essex, 2018). The research questions are:

- To what extent do employee fathers perceive that FWAs are available?
- How do employee mothers and fathers differ in their perceived availability of FWAs?
- What individual and workplace characteristics of employee fathers are associated with a perception that FWAs are not available?

### **Perceptions, access and use of FWAs: Conceptual and empirical distinctions**

In the UK, providing they have worked with their employer for six months continuously, employees with an employment contract have a legal right to request FWAs. Before June 2014, the right only applied to parents of children under 17 (or 18 in the case of disabled children) or those caring for an adult. Subsequently, any eligible employee can apply, though agency workers cannot (ACAS, 2016). Employers are legally bound to consider requests but have the right to refuse them if there is a business case to do so.

Despite the legal entitlement to request FWAs, access is a complex process. This process starts with the employer knowing about the FWA, undertaking to provide it in principle, and advertising its availability. An employee who meets the eligibility requirements must be aware of the FWA and perceive that it might be available to them personally if they asked for it. Based on this perception, the employee can make an FWA request. The employer will respond, and, if this response is positive, the employee can take up the FWA. At any stage of this interactive process, barriers can emerge. Figure 1 summarizes this process<sup>1</sup>.

**[Figure 1 here]**

Existing evidence on each part of the process is sparse, particularly from the perspective of fathers. Working Families (2019) report that many parents would like to work flexibly. Yet, recent evidence suggests that only around a quarter of managers know that employees can request FWAs (Chartered Management Institute, 2019). Moreover, it is currently not mandatory to advertise FWAs.

The extent to which fathers perceive FWAs as available is largely unknown, as most evidence relates to workers generally (e.g. Budd and Mumford, 2006; Chen and Fulmer, 2018; Swanberg et al., 2005; Wheatley, 2016) or to mothers (Chung and Van der Horst, 2018a). These studies show that more advantaged employees are more likely to perceive FWAs as available. Evidence on the results of requests is also incomplete. Experimental studies show that responses to FWA requests depend on who makes the request, the type of flexibility requested and its purpose (Brescoll et al., 2013; Munsch, 2016). For example, requests for reduced hours are less likely to be granted to fathers than mothers (Munsch, 2016).

Compared to other European countries, there are relatively high levels of home working and flexible hours amongst UK employees (Eurofound and ILO, 2017). Recent data shows that 10.6% of fathers and 12.2% of mothers work flexible hours (compared with 9.8% of men and 10.9% of women overall). 1.8% of fathers and 11% of mothers work only during school term-times (compared with 1.4% of men overall and 6.2% of women overall) (ONS, 2018a). Women are far more likely to work part time than men, which has not changed since the right to request FWAs was introduced (ONS, 2018b). However, evidence on uptake of the full range of FWA options for fathers is limited. There is little knowledge on disparities in use *among* fathers, but evidence indicates that FWAs are more commonly used by workers who are advantaged in terms of education and occupational status (Golden, 2001, 2008).

To summarise, while demand for FWAs is generally high and may be growing among fathers (Working Families, 2019), employer awareness, employee perceived availability and use of FWAs are relatively low. Use is higher among parents, but there is a disparity in use of hours reduction (especially part time) between mothers and fathers. However, evidence on each part of the process is limited from the perspective of fathers. To fill this gap, the present article focuses on perceived availability – its level among fathers, how it varies between fathers and mothers, and how it varies among fathers.

### **What shapes fathers' perceptions of the availability of FWAs?**

On one level, fathers' perceptions may be informed by their gender-role attitudes. Fathers who identify with a breadwinner model of fatherhood may be less likely to perceive FWAs as relevant to them (Haas and Hwang, 2007; Gatrell et al., 2014) and feel that using FWAs would undermine their masculinity (Vandello et al., 2013). In contrast, ever fewer British men agree that a man's job is to earn money and a woman's job is to look after the home and family (Taylor and Scott, 2018). These changing attitudes are likely to drive increasing demand for FWAs.

However, while individual gender role attitudes are undoubtedly an important determinant of the perceived availability of FWAs, fathers' perceptions should be understood from the perspective of multiple barriers, at both the individual and workplace levels. Even if fathers are supportive of FWAs in principle, these barriers may preclude the perception that FWAs are available to them personally. Our perspective aligns with a sociological emphasis on the cultural and structural constraints on individual choices concerning the combination of work and family life (e.g. Crompton, 2006; Deutsch, 1999; Gerstel and Clawson, 2018; Pedulla and Thébaud, 2015) and draws particularly on the sense of entitlement framework (e.g. Lewis, 1996; Lewis and Smithson, 1997; Lewis and Smithson, 2001) and the concepts of ideal worker norms and flexibility stigma (Kelly et al., 2011; Williams, 2001; 2010).

### *Sense of entitlement*

A sense of entitlement in this context refers to employees' views about what is normal, feasible and appropriate work-family support (Lewis 1996; Lewis and Smithson, 2001). Sense of entitlement is different from actual entitlement, as it is influenced by social, normative and feasibility comparisons (Lewis, 1996). It largely hinges on whether employees feel that work-family support from an employer is a *favour* or a *right* (Lewis and Smithson 2001; Chatrakul Na Ayudhya and Smithson, 2016). There is a widespread perception that FWAs are a favour to women due to their dual role as caregivers and workers (Atkinson and Hall, 2009). Thus, men typically have a lower sense of entitlement (Gatrell et al., 2014; Lewis and Smithson, 2001). This perception may also reflect fathers' gender role beliefs. Lewis and Smithson (2001) suggest that fathers with traditional gender expectations will feel less entitled to support to combine work and care; such men may report that FWAs are not personally available to them.

Employees' expectations of work-family support are also connected to perceived organisational support, or 'global beliefs concerning the extent to which an organisation values their contribution and cares about their wellbeing' (Eisenberger et al., 1986: 97). Several studies have found an association between perceived availability work-family support and organisational commitment, sense of belonging and job satisfaction (Casper and Harris, 2008; Chen & Fulmer, 2018). Employees who feel more valued are more likely to perceive FWAs as available. This is likely to be related to status - for example, higher educated and skilled employees may feel more valued. These perceptions may be well founded if, as suggested by the institutional perspective on work-family policies (e.g. Osterman, 1995), employers selectively award FWAs to valued employees to incentivise or reward performance (see also Gray and Tudball, 2003; Ortega, 2009). This may explain why higher skilled employees are more likely to access FWAs (Budd and Mumford, 2006; Chung, 2017, 2018b; Dex and Smith, 2002; Kossek and Lautsch, 2018). The sense of entitlement to FWAs may be boosted by union activity,

which can increase workers' knowledge of FWAs, thus driving perceived availability (Budd and Mumford, 2004).

### *Ideal worker norms and flexibility stigma*

Beliefs and perceptions about work-family support are also derived from organisational work-family culture, the 'shared assumptions, beliefs and values regarding the way in which an organisation supports and values the integration of employees work and family' (Thompson et al., 1999: 394). Organisational culture shapes the subjective meanings individuals attach to work-family policies such as FWAs as well as the expected consequences and judgements surrounding them, in particular through ideal worker norms (Kelly et al., 2011) and flexibility stigma (Williams et al., 2013). The ideal worker can dedicate all of their time and energy to work (Kelly et al., 2011; Blair-Loy, 2014). While long hours are prevalent among both genders, given the traditional gender division of labour that persists in many families, women are less able to fulfil ideal worker norms (Acker, 1990; Lewis and Humbert, 2010). Preferences for workers that fulfil ideal worker norms and working cultures that value such norms could influence decisions taken by management about whether to make FWAs openly available (Burnett et al., 2010; Haas and Hwang, 2007; Tracy and Rivera, 2010) and influence whether fathers perceive them as available.

Flexibility stigma manifests as negative evaluations of those who use flexible working for care purposes (Williams et al., 2013), including the perception that flexible workers are less productive and committed (Chung, 2018a). This stigma may induce a feeling in fathers that FWAs would not be available to them due to anticipated negative judgements from colleagues or managers and potential negative career outcomes. The stigma is present across workplaces, but is more commonly reported by men (Chung, 2018a; Vandello et al., 2013), in male-dominated workplaces (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014; Reid, 2011), in routine and manual occupations, in male-dominated industries (Chung, 2018a) and among fathers (Coltrane et al. 2013). Echoing these findings, Williams et al (2013) observe that for men in low-wage jobs, there is a commitment to not being seen to 'game the system', plus a masculine identity tied to breadwinning wherein flexibility is seen as feminine. Flexibility stigma is particularly intense in relation to FWAs that reduce working hours since this is the strongest violation of ideal worker norms (Chung, 2018a).

There are also structural factors which may shape fathers' perceptions of the availability of FWAs. 'Knowledge work' is more conducive to FWAs since it relies on technology, making flexible schedules and location more feasible. In contrast, routine, manual, and customer service work requires presence at specific shifts (see Williams et al., 2013). Low wage jobs often have rigid and/or unpredictable schedules and more serious consequences for not keeping to them. Therefore, there is

more scope for FWAs in professional jobs, particularly for those in higher status roles and particularly for location and schedule flexibility. FWAs require a certain tenure, which may be less common in jobs with high turnover where workers are classed as self-employed and thereby denied employment rights. This so-called ‘dependent self-employment’ (Eurofound, 2013), is more common in lower-paid service work (Williams and Horodnic, 2018) or industries such as construction due to seasonality and heightened economic vulnerability, as compared to the stability in public employment (Gallie et al., 2017). Moreover, FWAs that reduce hours inevitably limit income, making them less feasible for fathers in lower paid positions.

Overall, the literature suggests that perceived availability of FWAs will be lower among fathers than among mothers, due to gendered flexibility stigma and sense of entitlement. Thus, we expect fathers to be more likely to perceive FWAs as unavailable, particularly those that reduce working hours. We also expect systematic variation *among* fathers. The limited sense of entitlement and flexibility stigma already held by some men may be compounded by low education and occupational status, inducing a lower sense of organisational belonging and value, reinforced by a dearth of feasible options to work flexibly and limited financial viability of hours reduction. A perception that FWAs are not available might stem from fathers’ own flexibility stigma or from stigma attributed to managers and colleagues. We expect this will be heightened in male-dominated industries and thus that perceived availability of FWAs will be lower for fathers in such industries. We also expect that fathers in unionised workplaces will be more likely to perceive FWAs are available due to unions’ role in boosting awareness of FWAs and tackling stigma.

## **Methods**

### *Data and sample*

We use data from Wave 6 of Understanding Society, a representative longitudinal household survey, collected in 2015. The survey interviews all adult members of sampled households about different aspects of their lives including labour market experience. Though we focus on fathers, our analytic sample consists of employee parents, defined as employee men and women with one or more dependent children in their household<sup>2</sup>. A dependent child is aged under 16 (or aged 16-18 and in school or non-advanced further education), unmarried, and living with a parent<sup>3</sup>. The sample includes biological parents, adoptive parents, foster parents, and step-parents. For the first part of the analysis we compare mothers and fathers (N = 5934; 3072 mothers, 2862 fathers). For the second part we focus on employee fathers only (N = 2862)<sup>4</sup>.

### *Measuring perceived availability of FWAs*



Employee respondents were asked:

*I would like to ask about working arrangements at the place where you work. If you personally needed any, which of the arrangements listed on the card are available at your workplace?*

Respondents were shown a card with the following options: flexi-time, part-time working, working a compressed week, working from home on a regular basis, working term-time only, job sharing, annualised hours, other flexible working arrangements, or none of these. This question has strengths and weaknesses for capturing perceived availability of FWAs. It encourages respondents to reflect on their situation in their own workplace and to consider various FWAs. A weakness is the lack of follow-up for those who give a negative answer - responding that an FWA is unavailable could mean the respondent is genuinely unaware of the arrangement, is aware but ineligible, or is aware but feels that the FWA is not available to them in practice due to cultural and structural barriers described above. We interpret negative responses as reflecting a combination of these scenarios but cannot disentangle them empirically.

Following scholarship that emphasises the distinction between FWAs that alter schedule and location and those that reduce hours (e.g. Chen & Fulmer 2018; Chung, 2018a), we group FWAs into three categories: hours reduction (part-time working, term-time working, and job share), schedule flexibility (flexi-time, compressed week, annualised hours), and working from home. Our multivariate analysis focuses those who indicated none of the arrangements in each category as available, compared to those who indicated one or more FWA within each category as available.

### *Independent variables*

For our multivariate analysis, we include independent variables capturing individual and work characteristics.

Individual:

- *Qualifications*: Degree or higher, A level or equivalent, GCSE or equivalent, other qualifications, no qualifications.
- *Ethnicity*: White, Mixed, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Other Asian, Black African/Black Caribbean, Other ethnicity.
- *Age*: Age in years, age in years squared.

Work:

- *Occupation*: Managerial and professional, Intermediate, Lower supervisory and technical Semi-routine and routine<sup>5</sup>.
- *Economic sector*: Other organisation<sup>6</sup>, private sector, public sector.
- *Gender composition of industry*: Female-dominated industry; male-dominated industry, equal distribution<sup>7</sup>.
- *Trade union presence in workplace*: Union presence, no union presence.

### *Analytical methods*

We estimate logistic regression models, presenting the odds ratio of having no access to FWAs within each category, as compared to at least one FWA in each category. For each variable, the odds ratio indicates the odds of a father with a given characteristic having no perceived access to the category of FWA in question, compared to the odds for a father in the reference category. Variables are entered in four stages, starting with individual characteristics (Model 1), then sequentially adding occupation (Model 2), economic sector and gender composition of industry (Model 3) and trade union presence (Model 4). Only Model 4 results are presented; other model specifications are included in the Technical Appendix.

## **Results**

Overall, 30% of fathers and 10% of mothers reported that no form of FWA was available to them (while 70% and 90% respectively said that one or more FWAs was available). The disparity between mothers and fathers and the relatively low perceived availability among fathers are striking<sup>8</sup>.

Among those who reported at least one FWA as available, there is substantial variation between mothers and fathers in what arrangements were perceived as available (see Figure 2). Part-time work is far more commonly reported as available by mothers (78% of mothers and 42% of fathers). Job-share and term-time working are also more likely to be reported as available by mothers. Flexi-time is reported by similar proportions of fathers and mothers, while working from home is more likely to be reported by fathers (23% vs. 19%).

The differences in perceptions of the availability of hours reduction options hold when adjusting for a range of individual and workplace factors (see Technical Appendix 2). Including controls, fathers have four times higher odds of saying that hours reduction is not available, compared to mothers. Therefore, gendered variability in the perceived availability of hours reduction is not explained by

mothers and fathers working in different sectors, industries, or occupations. Moreover, no gender differences are observed for schedule and location flexibility. This result is likely to reflect gendered sense of entitlement or flexibility stigma surrounding FWAs that reduce hours, which might apply less to those that increase autonomy over schedule or location (Lott and Chung 2016; Chung and Van der Horst 2018b).

**[Figure 2 here]**

We now turn to the sample of employee fathers and explore the factors associated with the perception that FWAs are not available. The multivariate analysis reported in Table 1 explores whether having no perceived access to any form of FWA in each category (hours reduction, schedule flexibility, working from home) is related to fathers' individual and workplace characteristics. Full model specifications are reported in Technical Appendices 3-5.

**[Table 1 here]**

The perception that hours reduction is unavailable is more common among lower educated fathers. For example, the odds for fathers with A-levels are 39 per cent higher than the odds for fathers with a degree (OR: 1.39). Fathers who identify as Indian are more likely to perceive that they cannot reduce their hours, compared to fathers who identify as white British (OR: 1.73 in Model 2). Perceptions do not vary by age. Fathers in lower supervisory/technical occupations are more likely to perceive hours reduction as unavailable, compared to professional/managerial fathers (OR: 2.27); however, there is no significant association for those in routine or intermediate occupations, suggesting that hours reduction could be more common in such occupations. Fathers in the private sector and in male-dominated industries are more likely to perceive that they cannot reduce their hours. Fathers in workplaces with no union presence have higher odds of perceiving hours reduction as unavailable, compared to fathers whose workplace has a union presence (OR: 1.74).

In terms of schedule flexibility, again, lower educated fathers are more likely to perceive no availability. The strongest difference is between GCSE- and degree-educated fathers (OR: 1.5). There are no differences by ethnicity or age. However, fathers in lower supervisory, technical, and routine occupations are more likely than professional/managerial fathers to perceive that schedule flexibility is unavailable, as are fathers in the private sector.

In contrast to hours reduction, fathers working in *female-dominated industries* are more likely to perceive schedule flexibility as unavailable, compared to fathers in gender-integrated industries (OR: 2.15). Echoing the results for hours reduction, fathers in workplaces with no union presence are more

likely to perceive schedule flexibility as unavailable, independently of industry or gender composition of sector (OR: 1.76).

Fathers with lower education are again less likely to perceive that they can work from home. However, these educational differences largely disappear when controlling for occupation, suggesting that home working is more likely to be perceived as available by degree-educated fathers in professional and managerial jobs. Older fathers are slightly more likely to perceive that they can work from home than younger fathers, perhaps due to seniority. Fathers working in 'other types of organisation' (mainly NGOs) are more likely to perceive they can work from home compared to fathers in the public sector (OR: 0.46). As for schedule flexibility, fathers in female-dominated industries are more likely to perceive that they cannot work from home, compared to fathers in gender-integrated industries (OR: 1.49). Fathers in workplaces with no union presence are more likely to perceive working from home as unavailable, independently of industry or gender composition of sector (OR: 1.46).

## Discussion

This study analyses the perceived availability of FWAs among employee parents in the UK, with a focus on fathers. The aim was to compare fathers' perceived access to mothers', and then uncover systematic variation in fathers' perceived access to FWAs according to individual and workplace characteristics. Identifying the barriers to perceived availability among fathers could offer clues as to how to increase fathers' use of FWAs.

The finding that employed fathers are less likely than employed mothers to report any FWA that involves a reduction in working time as available is revealing. This pattern is not explained by mothers and fathers working in different sectors, industries or occupations. By contrast, there is no gender difference in perceptions in relation to the other forms of FWA. Fathers are *equally* likely to report availability of FWAs which do not reduce hours, such as working from home and flexi-time. These findings show strongly gendered perceptions around hours reduction, which may partly be due to the loss of income associated with reduced hours in a labour market skewed to male income privilege (Olsen et al. 2018) and may reflect the violation of masculine ideal worker norms, a key component of flexibility stigma (Chung, 2018a; Williams et al., 2013).

Results also show systematic variation among employed fathers in the perceived availability of FWAs. Education level is an important driver of fathers' perceived access to all types of FWA, with degree-educated fathers most likely to perceive that they can reduce hours, alter schedules or work from home. In the case of schedule flexibility and hours reduction, this relationship persists across the

models, while for working from home it appears to be driven by occupation. Drawing on the sense of entitlement framework, education level may be driving fathers' understanding of their value to the organisation and thus their sense of entitlement to FWAs. Similarly, fathers in occupations other than professional and managerial are more likely to perceive FWAs as unavailable. These occupational differences are likely to reflect both the sense of entitlement for fathers in jobs with different levels of status, as well as practical constraints. Flexible schedules and location are more feasible in office-based professional and managerial jobs, whereas working hours and location are often highly structured in other occupations (Williams et al., 2013). Focusing on fathers, our findings thus extend previous research suggesting that socio-economic factors, such as occupation and education level, are important in shaping workers' perceived access to FWAs (e.g. Budd & Mumford, 2006; Chung, 2017; Chung, 2018b; Golden, 2001, 2008).

We showed that perceived availability of hours reduction is lower for fathers in male-dominated industries, possibly reflecting heightened flexibility stigma (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014; Reid, 2011). The finding that perceived availability of schedule flexibility and working from home is lower among fathers in *female dominated workplaces* requires further investigation. Chung (2018c) also finds that workers in female-dominated workplaces have lower access to schedule control and suggests this may be due to lower employee autonomy. The present analysis is consistent with Chung (2018c) in that fathers' perceived accessibility of all FWAs is greatest in gender-integrated industries.

Across all forms of FWA, perceived availability is higher among fathers in the public sector. This might be due to lower flexibility stigma, but also job security, which leads to a greater sense of entitlement to work-family support, as well as a higher likelihood of fulfilling eligibility criteria. The finding that union presence increases perceived access to FWAs provides further evidence, focusing on fathers, that union activity can boost perceptions of FWA availability (e.g. Budd & Mumford, 2004; Bryson and Forth, 2017; Swanberg et al., 2005; Golden, 2008) as well as eventual uptake, by contributing to the formalisation of FWA policies in workplaces (see Burdin and Pérotin, 2019).

There are some limitations to the analysis. First, perceptions of availability are just one stage in the process of obtaining FWAs (see Figure 1). Further research is needed to understand the interplay of individual, household, and workplace characteristics underlying fathers' need, perceptions, requests and eventual access to different forms of FWA, with new data collection required. Second, even if fathers use FWAs, this may be for performance-enhancing purposes rather than to mitigate work-family conflict (see Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014; Chung and Van der Horst, 2018b; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Lott and Chung, 2016; Van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2018). Moreover, fathers from all socio-economic groups have spent more time on domestic and care tasks in recent decades (Sullivan, 2010), regardless of their working arrangements. This paper underscores the importance of

further research into how fathers actually use FWAs and the effects on families. Third, the analysis does not include self-employed fathers. Finally, we do not study sense of entitlement and flexibility stigma directly, instead highlighting systematic variation in fathers' perceptions. This limitation signals a need for empirical studies of how sense of entitlement and flexibility stigma are experienced by fathers in different workplaces, building on the present study and Chung (2018a).

## **Conclusion**

Since 2003, many parents in Britain have had the right to request flexible working arrangements (FWAs), which can be used to alter the hours, schedule or location of work. Fathers using FWAs has the potential to reduce work-family conflict, enable children to benefit from paternal engagement and contribute to tackling gender inequality in earnings. However, the process of accessing FWAs involves multiple stages and potential barriers, wherein perceptions of availability are key to eventual use. To date, there has been relatively little research exploring fathers' experiences of FWAs, with most work-life balance research focusing on mothers. Using a nationally representative sample of working parents in the UK, this article situates fathers' perceptions of FWA availability in the context of multiple structural and cultural constraints, including sense of entitlement and flexibility stigma.

Our first contribution is to demonstrate, using large-scale data, that fathers are more likely to report that FWAs that reduce working hours are unavailable, compared to mothers, and compared to other FWAs. This difference is not explained by mothers and fathers working in different occupations, sectors or industries, suggesting these perceptions are strongly gendered. Our second contribution is to highlight systematic variation among fathers themselves in the perceived availability of FWAs, adding to the growing evidence base on workers' varied perceptions of FWAs (e.g. Budd and Mumford, 2006; Chung, 2018a; Chung and Van der Horst, 2017; Swanberg et al., 2005; Golden, 2001, 2008). Fathers with the most educational and occupational resources are more likely to perceive FWAs as available. These differences are likely to reflect a complex combination of factors including sense of entitlement, flexibility stigma and the practical feasibility of FWAs, in addition to individuals' gender role beliefs and preferences, employers' selective allocation of FWAs, as well as widespread ignorance of FWAs among employers (Chartered Management Institute, 2019). Since, overall, more privileged fathers are more likely to perceive FWAs as available, the findings also echo previous studies showing that social investment-style family policies are plagued by 'Matthew effects' whereby more privileged families disproportionately benefit even where policies are supposedly universal (e.g. Ghysels & Van Lancker, 2011). To increase all fathers' use of FWAs, these barriers must be tackled. Findings indicate this could be achieved by union activity to raise awareness

of and enforce employers' commitments to these workplace entitlements. Awareness-raising activities could usefully be targeted at fathers with fewer resources.

Low perceived availability of hours reduction, particularly among less advantaged fathers, is likely to reflect fathers' long working hours (e.g. Dermott, 2006), which both reinforces and is reinforced by gender pay inequality, a lack of affordable childcare, women continuing to fulfil the majority of domestic labour, and negative gendered perceptions of part-time jobs (Atkinson and Hall, 2009). Given the greater potential of hours reduction to be used for childcare rather than career development purposes, UK work-family policy efforts could focus on increasing awareness and reducing stigma around hours reduction for both parents when children are young, potentially taking inspiration from parents' guarantees to shorter working days in Nordic countries (Duvander and Löfgren, 2019). Changing perceptions around hours reduction could form part of broader efforts to tackle long-hours work culture and close the gender pay gap as well as ensuring that parents can fulfil shared parenting aspirations.

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### Supplementary material

The supplementary material is available online with the article.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the process of formally requesting FWAs, see: <https://www.gov.uk/flexible-working/applying-for-flexible-working>.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis only includes resident parents, which is more problematic in the case of fathers, given the diversity of modern fatherhood. Research is ongoing into increasing the capacity of quantitative research data to capture different varieties of fatherhood in the UK (Goldman and Burgess, 2017), so it may be possible to take account of non-resident fathers in future research.

<sup>3</sup> See: [https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage/dataset-documentation/wave/6/datafile/f\\_indresp/variable/f\\_depchl\\_dv](https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage/dataset-documentation/wave/6/datafile/f_indresp/variable/f_depchl_dv)

<sup>4</sup> Our sample of employee fathers has a similar age, educational and occupational profile to the coupled and lone resident fathers identified by Speight et al. (2013). Employee resident fathers are a fairly selective group of UK men with more socio-economic advantages (higher occupational status and education level) compared to non-fathers and non-resident fathers. Descriptive statistics are available in Technical Appendix 1.

<sup>5</sup> These groups are derived from the five-class NS-SEC occupational classification system (excluding the self-employed and unemployed categories of this classification). More details on the classification and example occupations can be found in Rose and Pevalin (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Mainly third sector organisations, such as NGOs.

<sup>7</sup> This was assigned to individuals' given industry of work based on gender compositions from the 2017 Labour Force Survey. Industries with over 70% female employees were designated as 'female-dominated'; between 30% and 70% as 'equal distribution'; and 0-30% as male-dominated.

<sup>8</sup> Findings are similar when comparing men overall with women overall, and non-fathers with non-mothers. Men overall: 30% FWA not available, 70% available. Female overall: 14% not available, 86% available. Men, non-fathers: 30% not available, 70% available. Female, non-mothers: 16% not available, 84% available.

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## Tables

**Table 1 Logistic regression predicting ‘no flexible working options available’, employed father sample, odds ratios**

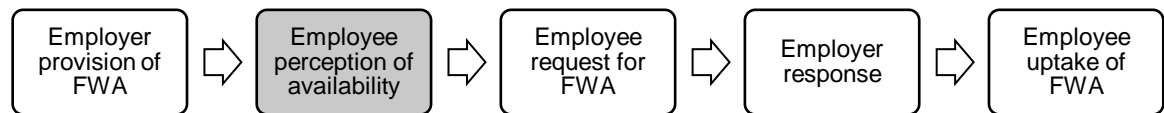
	Hours reduction	Schedule flexibility	Working from home
<b>Highest qualification</b>			
Ref: degree			
A level	1.392*	1.195	1.361*
GCSE	1.509**	1.500**	1.101
Other	1.587	1.124	1.63
No qualification	1.19	1.845	1.391
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Ref: white			
Mixed	0.658	0.86	1.086
Indian	1.731*	1.139	1.715
Pakistani	0.809	0.79	1.357
Bangladeshi	0.738	1.002	1.595
Other Asian	0.996	0.898	1.659
Black African/Black Caribbean	0.529	1.084	0.889
Other ethnicity	1.013	0.565	0.567
<b>Age</b>			
Age in years	1.005	0.952	0.879*
Age squared	1	1.001	1.002*
<b>Occupation</b>			
Ref: Managerial and professional			
Intermediate	0.9	1.035	1.31
Lower supervisory and technical	2.273***	2.387***	2.479***
Semi-routine and routine	0.98	1.939***	2.360***
<b>Sector</b>			
Ref: public sector			
Private sector	1.426*	1.461*	0.918
Other type of organization	1.734	0.932	0.475**
<b>Gender composition of industry</b>			
Ref: equal distribution			
Male-dominated	1.906***	1.043	0.873
Female-dominated	0.734	2.145***	1.493*
<b>Union presence</b>			
Ref: union			

No union	1.735***	1.759***	1.455**
<i>N</i>	2862	2862	2862

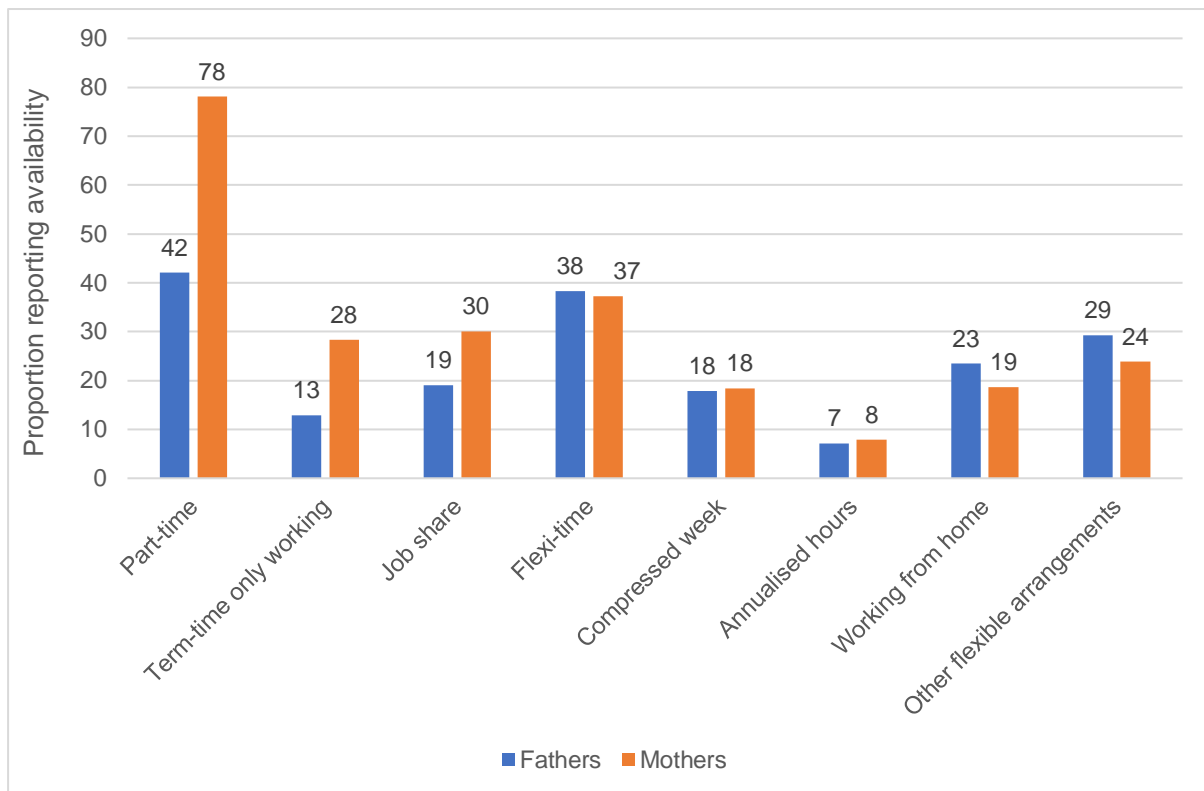
Source: Understanding Society, Wave 6. Weighted estimates. 'No hours reduction options' (N=1568 in employee father sample) compared to 'at least one' (N=1294 in employee father sample). 'No schedule flexibility options' (N= 1670 in employee father sample) compared to 'at least one' (N=1192 in employee father sample). 'No WFH options' (N= 2061 in employee father sample) compared to 'at least one' (N=801 in employee father sample). 'Not applicable' responses excluded from analysis. Exponentiated coefficients (Odds ratios) \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

## Figures

**Figure 1 The process of accessing FWAs**



**Figure 2 Perceived access to FWAs among employee fathers and mothers**



Source: Understanding Society, Wave 6. All employee fathers and mothers (weighted measures). N mothers=3072; N fathers=2862.



